

[George F. Gaynor]

New York Beliefs & Customs — Folk Stuff 19

JUN 19 1939

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Swenson

ADDRESS

DATE June 5, 1939

SUBJECT Folklore of Communications, Marine Radio Operators

1. Date and time of interview

2. Place of interview

3. Name and address of informant

George F. Gaynor (Excerpts from diary, continued)

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

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5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Swenson

ADDRESS

DATE June 5, 1939

SUBJECT Folklore of Communications, Marine Radio Operators

On February 2, 1925, I enlisted in the U. S. Coast Guard as radioman 3rd class, for a period of one year, at the Barge Office, located at the Battery, N. Y. C. I was assigned to duty aboard the Cutter, Mojave, at Stapleton, Staten Island. The following morning before I had any chance to get acquainted with my shipmates, I received orders to proceed immediately by train to the Naval Procedure Communication School, recently established at The Coast Guard Academy, New London, Conn.

With the home port at Base 2, Staten Island, the Mojave cruised along the New York and Jersey coasts patrolling the sea, on the lookout for rumships or derelicts reported by radio to be in our vicinity. The radio operators maintained an alert watch on the distress frequency "600" meters, ready to pass the information up the tube to the bridge, where the

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officer on watch would change the course of the ship to go to the aid of those men who go down to the sea in ships.

The radio room was both comfortable and efficient. At night all the operators would congregate in the radio shack to indulge in lengthy discussions, of anything and everything concerning world affairs.

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After 8 o'clock most of the lights were turned off below decks, consequently the shack was always a welcome gathering place for both officers and men coming on, or going off watch, stopping to chat for a few minutes before turning in, or continuing on to their various posts throughout the ship.

The radio apparatus consisted of a 1-[KW?] Arc transmitter, a 1/2-KW quenched spark transmitter, and a regulation navy type number "1420" receiver completed the equipment. The Mojave's call letters were "NIXB".

It soon became apparent to officers and men alike, that the Coast Guard under the supervision of the Treasury Dept. at Washington, was going to be held responsible in seeing that the 18th Amendment was enforced at sea, preventing the landing of contraband cargos of liquor on American coasts.

Rum-row was indeed a busy place. The large ships with cargos of contraband, were anchored just outside the 12-mile limit, all along the Atlantic coast. Schooners of all sizes and descriptions, sails flapping in the wind, would contact the steamers at night. After receiving a cargo, they would hover near the international limit until dark, then high-powered motor boats without any running lights would endeavor to make contact, take on a load and make a dash for shore at such high speed, it was more often than not impossible for the cutters with an average speed of 12 knots or less, to overhaul them or even make them heave-to by resorting to gunfire.

While cruising along our area, during one of our patrol periods, the Mojave came within hailing distance of a Belgium steamer, unloading a cargo of contraband aboard a Swedish schooner several miles 4 beyond the international 12-mile limit. According to international law, it was illegal for two ships to exchange cargo on the high seas. In this case however, the law did not apply, because of the fact that both ships were of foreign registry. If one of those ships had been under American registry the captain would have been in the law in placing both ships under arrest. The situation was a delicate one and vexed the captain because he could do nothing about it. The captain paced up and down the deck on the bridge angry and annoyed at his apparent helplessness. Suddenly he stopped, gave an order to the officer on watch and within a few minutes the ship was maneuvered closer to the rum ships. He said, "If you don't cut loose in five minutes, I'll run you down." This was simply a bluff, but with that, the Mojave steamed away a short distance. Orders were passed along to the deck force and gun crew. Every effort was made to make the captain's bluff look effective. Collision mats were secured over the sides, the gun crew swung the 3-inch gun around, the deck force rushed around with hawsers, while another force of men with side-arms and grappling hooks stood by as if they were going to be ready for any kind of action. Then signals were exchanged between the engine room and the bridge. The Mojave swung about, heading directly for a point in between both ships at full speed, as the men on board continued unloading, paying no attention whatever to the cutter bearing down on them at full speed. The captain's ruse had failed badly. In a gruff tone he ordered the ship about on another course, then stalked angrily off the bridge to his cabin, where for the next few hours he buried himself in the contents of various books on international law.

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One day while on duty, Commander Wheeler stord into the shack and said, "Get in touch with patrol boat CG-176, and tell the skipper to proceed to the Mojave's position immediately." "Aye, Aye, sir," I replied, switched on the phone transmitter and called the patrol boat for 15 minutes at intervals without success. The Commander again entered the shack and on finding out the boat had not been contacted, he became angry. Muttering

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in an undertone the Commander said something to the effect that perhaps the operators were in sympathy with the bootleggers. That remark sort of rubbed me the wrong way too, and as he turned on his heel and left the shack, I grabbed the mike and in a loud tone of voice that could be easily heard out on deck, I called the CG-176 again. The men out on deck hearing the CG-176 being called and several of them knowing the boat was tied up astern of our own ship, the rapidly climbed up the ladder and informed of the fact. I have often wondered if the Commander's face was red when he found that out!

The Coast Guard blockade had become much too effective to suit the aims of the wet fleet, consequently it was not long before the rum runners began to take reprisals on the dry fleet. Real/ war was declared, cutters were crippled, men kidnapped, officials threatened in sabotage campaigns. Guard ships received orders to shoot to kill if necessary. The smugglers had retreated to a position about 30 miles out, riding at anchor most of the time, unable to land a case of liquor. Then the rum armada began to make use of carrier pigeons, in an effort to establish a line of communication with points ashore. The reprisals resorted to be rum runners at sea and their confederates ashore became serious and reached large proportions. Coast Guardsmen were being waylaid and beaten on their way back to ship or station. The recruiting 6 offices were finding it difficult to enlist desirablenen for this hazardous work, and at this time the service was badly in need of personnel for vacancies and recently organized units.

In spite of careful guarding of Coast Guard vessels, acts of sabotage were committed. The destroyer Jewett was damaged to the extent of thousands of dollars. A small piece of steel had been most cleverly inserted in the Jewett's steam turbine, and was not discovered until the machinery began to misbehave while on patrol at sea. Explosions on our own ships were frequently the work of spies and often resulted in casualties. One of the destroyers at New London was even scuttled at her dock. The sea-cocks were opened and before the ship's force were aware of what happened, the/ ship began to settle from the rapid inflow of water. The crew stood waist deep in the hold trying to close the sea-cocks, while other destroyers alongside secured lined aboard to help prevent the ship from

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sinking. The campaign of the dry forces was to attempt to starve the wets away. Without means of obtaining supplies and water, they could not remain on the row indefinitely.

On Sunday, May 10, a thick pea-soup fog enveloped both sides on rum row. Bells could be heard jangling every few minutes from ships that were anchored, and at regular intervals, long blasts of steam whistles, indicated some ships were underway. The fog was an advantage to the wets. During the day reports were received that 150 cases were landed on Long Island at the town of Easthampton. The fog hung on through the following day, while the rum smugglers drew in near shore to make contacts. The dry fleet doubled vigilance as pilots of liners reported 8 wets off Sandy Hook, although there wasn't much that could be done until the fog lifted. It was apparent to all that the outlaws must move soon, as reports indicated their supplies and water were low.

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Night after night, under cover of darkness, the Mojave with darkened ship patrolled the area of activity. The rum ships also moved about without lights and the danger of collision was imminent. On the bridge the officers listened intently for the purr of the high powered motor on the rum boat. Once this sound had been detected, the gun crew jumped to their stations, a whistle would come through the communication tube in the shack, the order from the bridge would be "Man the searchlight". The second operator dashed out of the shack, up a ladder to the hurricane bridge, turned on the huge beam, directing it towards the sound of the motor. In a moment the enemy is brought into the glare of the rays from the light, and under full speed is making a gallant dash for shore with his cargo. Likewise under forced draft the Mojave follows in pursuit. The enemy boat leads us in a zig-zag course, making it difficult to keep the boat in the radius of the light. All that can be seen is the wake from the propeller. Shells from the 3-inch gun in flashing bursts explode ahead, astern and on either side. The men aboard the rum ship certainly have courage to run that quantlet of fire. Each time the gun is fired, the ship quivers and there is too much vibration from the excessive speed. The wind screams by the operator manning the light and his eyes fill with water, but the chase goes on and on, with the rum ship getting closer to shore

all the time. Perhaps we will lose him, but no, his motor is now shut off, the red and green running lights are turned on, an indication that he is hove-to, ready to be boarded. The captain signals the engine room and the Mojave is slowed down, while the captain hails the rum ship and orders the master to come alongside, only to find that during the chase the outlaws had thrown all of their cargo overboard. With all the evidence gone, they could only be held for violations of navigation.

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THE SINKING OF THE S-51

Just before dark on the evening of Friday, September 25, 1925, while walking across the bridge over the Thames River, on my way back to the ship, I stopped to watch the sister ship of the ill-fated S-51, heading for the Submarine Base. Reporting back to the ship I took over the watch, and shortly after 11 o'clock while listening to the various ships sending traffic, snapped to attention as I intercepted a message from the steamship "City of Rome", stating she had been in collision with and sank the Sub S-51; three survivors aboard and proceeding to Boston. Reports were garbled, and it wasn't until the next day that facts and times were corrected. The Mojave was soon underway and proceeding to the scene of the disaster, arriving at daybreak. There was little that could be done except to stand by while the navy forces took charge of the situation. Naval tenders and derrick ships Monarch and Century were ordered to the scene, as well as the Tug Triton with navy divers aboard. The Crilley and two range boats arrived and the USS Camden was placed in charge of operations. Soon the salvage ship Falcon and the Subs S-1, S-3, S-49 and S-10 with the tender Chewink joined the scene of the disaster. The only visible evidence of the tragedy was a patch of oil on the water.

The SS City of Rome running from Savannah to Boston, rammed and sank the S-51 with 33 men aboard at about 10:24 o'clock Friday night, 20 miles east of Block Island. The captain of the City of Rome said he was in his cabin writing the log. He came on deck, saw a white light off starboard. He watched it for a moment, when suddenly a red light flashed

from the submarine, meaning she was going to cross the bow. The captain ordered the wheel hard to port, engines reversed and whistled sounded as warning. It was too late. 9 Forty-five seconds later we crashed. In 15 seconds more the submarine had sunk. Life lines and buoys were thrown overboard, and the three survivors picked up. The captain stood by until 11:45. Although there were seven men said to have been tossed into the sea from the conning tower of the sub, only three were saved. The others sank before aid could reach them. The navy rescue ships worked like torjans trying to reach the men far below the surface trapped in the hull of the doomed submarine before the supply of oxygen was exhausted. All efforts were in vain.

On the night of October 25, 1925, I was standing the four to midnight trick, while outside the wind howled, and I felt grateful for the warmth and comfort of the radio shack with the ship alongside the dock. At 10:30 I copied the weather, which reported storm warnings being displayed from Eastport, Maine to Cape Hatteras, attended by winds of gale force. Carefully tuning the receiver on the distress frequency, I listened closely during the silent periods, for any weak signals. At 11:05 the air became tense as the SS Commonwealth sent out a "CQ", stating the ship was disabled 40 miles off Point Judith. The cain connecting one of the side propellers on the 5,980 ton ship had broken, anchors had been put out, but with a high wind and heavy sea, the ship was in a precarious position with 150 passengers aboard, and immediate assistance was requested. Immediately answering the operator on the Commonwealth, I told him to stand by while this information was passed on to the captain. Within the hour the Mojave was underway standing out to sea under forced draft. The coast stations had cleared the air and I resumed communication with the Commonwealth.

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On reaching the open sea the Mojave was struck by the full force of the gale as she sped on towards the aid of the stricken vessel. I asked the operator how the passengers were taking it. He replied, "They are all huddled in the lounge cabin forward, nervous but quiet." Through the remaining hours of the night we kept the transmitters going exchanging

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words of cheer and instructions. At the break of dawn, the Mojave drew up near the Commonwealth. She was rising and falling in a heavy sea, little activity was observed about the decks. With instructions from the captain, I radioed the Commonwealth, asking if they cared to lower a boat. The master replied, "No, not in this sea." The responsibility was ours from now on. Our captain didn't want to run the risk of losing a boat's crew either, so an attempt was made to shoot a line to the distressed vessel by means of an air gun. The Mojave was maneuvered as close as possible, and as she steamed by, the gun was fired. But the wind was too strong and the missile and twine was carried far beyond the length of the ship before it could be grasped by the members of the crew. Each succeeding attempt met with the same fate, while every man aboard held his breath in suspense, hoping the missile would catch somewhere on the other ship. All the while the Mojave was being swept by heavy seas, and compared to the size of the other vessel, looked like a bobbing cork. After many failures, the cord from the gun finally caught on a piece of the Commonwealth's superstructure, members of the crew rushed along the slippery deck to make it fast. Next a small hawser was connected to the end of the twine, when this had been hauled aboard through the water to the other vessel, a larger hawser was paid out. This procedure was continued until the crew of the Commonwealth had taken aboard one end of our ten-inch hawser, many hours were consumed accomplishing this much. The ends were now made fast in readiness to tow the Commonwealth to New Port, but we were still held up. Ordinarily ships anchors can be lowered or hoisted in a comparatively short time by means of the donkey engine on deck manned by the ship's power. As the power was all shut down on the Commonwealth, it was necessary for the crew to hoist the anchors by hand, and this took up considerable time. The job was long and tedious, consequently it was late in the afternoon before the Mojave received the signal to go ahead. The Mojave had to proceed at a very slow rate of speed due to the heavy seas and the danger of the tow line breaking from the strain. All went well, and the following morning the Commonwealth was turned loose in the harbor of New Port, safe and sound with all passengers. For the service rendered by the Mojave the steamship officials, to show their appreciation, presented the officers and crew with a letter

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of commendation for the display of splendid seamanship under adverse circumstances, and a complete set of ships silverware.

On February 1, 1926, my enlistment expired and I received an honorable discharge for one years service. Bidding the radio gang goodbye, I stepped down the gang plank, patted the steel hull of the ship that now seemed to have become a part of me. Now that I was leaving the old girl, I realized that I felt quite some affection for her.

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.....Our skipper was afflicted with a mania for bad weather. When a storm warning was copied indicating bad weather along the coast, he would read it and exclaim, "That's fine. WE'll head right out to sea." While all the other ships of the squadron had taken heed and sought shelter, the Diligence tossed and pitched in the teeth of the gale riding it out. When walls of green water swept over the ship, old man Dunne would jump up and down in the pilot house in childish glee. One night after I had turned in my bunk, a wave struck the ship broadside, followed by two more in rapid succession. The ship keeled over and seemed as though it would capsize. Jumping from my bunk to the deck below I made a dash up the ladder for the port, by this time the Diligence had regained an even keel again.

In the pilot house supposedly made fast to the bulkhead was a weather worn looking cuspidor, containing a quantity of liquids and solids, deposited there by the skipper, mates and bos'n. Day or night, at frequent intervals, the silence was shattered by the ker-plunk as a stream of tobacco juice made a bulls-eye in the ever filling receptacle. Thus one afternoon while on patrol, wallowing in a heavy sea, I stood braced in the doorway of the shack watching this interesting spectacle. The vessel had reached the limit of its territory and was due to be turned about. As the wheel was put over the ship slipped into the trough of the sea and keeled over on one side. Every loose object rolled or slid across the deck. The cuspidor however, still holding my interest, shot up from the deck and hit the

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Chief Bos'n square in the face, as the cuspidor fell to the deck rolling along at crazy angles towards the bulkhead, the bos'n's face was a sight to behold. As he gasped for breath, a long streaky brown mass slowly dripped to the deck.

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The following excerpts were taken from letters written by George F. Gaynor to his wife, while acting as radio operator on the Cable Ship Relay: Cable Ship RELAY at Sea, October 2, 1930

Just sent a report into New York stating we were going into Vineyard Haven for supplies and remain there until the weather abates. After leaving Tebo we had proceeded to Nantucket where one end of the cable was picked up and buoyed. As the French Cable Co. wanted to wait til Sunday when message traffic was at a minimum before attempting to repair it, we then proceeded to Cape Cod to lay a new shore end. This was accomplished without any difficulty, when the ship was headed again for Nantucket a fog closed in on us lasting for three days, during this time I was kept busy supplying the skipper with radio bearings. At last the fog cleared and the cable was picked up tested and repaired. These tests indicated there was another break twenty miles away. This too was repaired only to find that another break had occurred fifty miles south of our position. Work was being done on this section yesterday but after the cable was hooked it broke three times in succession. Heavy weather set in this morning. The captain decided to run for shelter and at the same time obtain supplies as the grub is getting low. When the cable is hooked on the cablegrounds the crew keeps working all through the night, the idea is to get as much work done as possible while the good weather lasts. Every night I copy the peess and baseball scores for the boys and they appreciate this.

You should have heard the skipper in a rage this afternoon when he was ready to go ashore. The launch was lowered, and the captain 14 noticed there wasn't any lamps, life belts, or any equipment in it. He called the mate down for it and then after the launch was started, the engine began to belch smoke and miss fire. It was a three or four mile run

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to shore and when about half way in the engine went dead. The old man had to man an oar with the quartermaster the rest of the way in. If the wind had not been astern of them the tide would have carried the boat up along the beach somewhere. I watched the entire spectacle through the glasses. When the old man was ready to return to the ship he had to hire a fishing boat to tow the launch back. To get the fishing boat, he had to locate the minister of the town who happened to be the owner.

The wind has died down a bit and the sky is clear. The moon and stars are very bright, but the air is very cold. I can see the lighthouse beam flashing from West Chop on one side, and other flashing lights along the coast.

When the ship left Vinyard Haven last Friday, we ran into a gale of wind and it sure was a corker. The captain's room, washbowl, wardrobe, etc. was demolished. Loose gear was washed overboard or kept swishing around the deck. One man had his finger caught in between a port when it slammed shut. Ward innured his ribs as he tried to brace himself when the resulting lurch threw him against the point of the loud speaker in the shack.

All day long the grappling hooks were out dragging for lengths of cable that had been stored on the ocean floor. The deck force is standing by as the remaining pieces are hauled aboard over the cable drum.

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The name of the vicinity where we were hove-to, is known to sailors as "Hell-Hole". Guess the old man on the bridge, must have seen Satan himself. During the storm I managed to take several pictures. The best one was a snap of the Chief Engineer coming down the ladder from the bridge, just as a big wave was coming over. A mess boy running along the deck saw the wave too and grabbed the Chief by the neck to save himself. They were both washed along the deck until the chief managed to get his arm around the rail. We are now moving along at a good clip and the sea is much calmer. The stars are out and except for rolling a bit the weather is good.

Alone in the shack, I was sitting here looking out through the port thinking how uncanny and weird it seems out here. The water underneath, the sky overhead, and the swish as the ship cuts through the domain of Neptune and Davy Jones Locker. When all of a sudden I was startled by the soft thud of a small white object on the deck at my feet. It was a flying fish who had been attracted by the light in the shack.

C. S. RELAY OFF CAPE MALA DECEMBER 7th:

The old battlewagon was underway all night. At eight this morning arrived at our position off Cape Mala about 18 miles off shore. Since our arrival there has been a strong north wind and heavy sea, consequently have been unable to proceed with the dragging. The cable in question was laid in 1882, so aged, there is likely to be difficulty in bringing it up without breaking. I kept moving from one side of the ship to the other all day to keep out of the wet. Seas have been sweeping over first one side than the 16 other, as the ship continued to swing about on the windward side. Late this afternoon took my daily bucket bath, ironed some shirts and a pair of trousers. After supper, washed some soiled [?] clothes and am now in the clear until it is time to listen for the weather report from Frisco. I may sleep on deck tonight, providing there is a dry spot to be found. This afternoon I had just finished pressing my trousers and laid them on my bunk for a moment when the ship rolled over and water poured in through the port. Drenching trousers and everything else in the cabin. If I leave the port open there is the advantage of a little fresh air, with of course the risk of a wetting. On the other hand, if it is kept closed, the heat is unbearable.

You would laugh if you could see how clothes are ironed on the little table in my cabin. It is about three feet wide by the same long, because of such close quarters everything is pressed in sections. While engaged in this occupation I usually strip down to my underpants because of the heat.

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At sundown tonight a gray haze enveloped the two peaks [astern?]. The sky was a shade of light blue, the horizon a deep orange and the sea dark blue as the shadows began to creek over it. The ship rolled from side to side in a gentle swell. The floodlights were turned on, making the foredeck bright as day, the crew standing at their posts stripped to the waist wearing nothing but a pair of trousers rolled up to the knees. At the bow the captain stands watching the cable, at times shouting orders to the bridge, such as "Hard aport", "A half starboard", "now steady". The electrician in the testing room patiently studies the wheatstone bridge. The grinding and groaning of the old cable engine as it pays in and out the cable. The second cook sitting outside the galley on an upturned bucket, peeling potatoes 17 for the morrow. The automatic clock on the bridge chimes out six bells, the quartermaster strikes six bells on the ships bells, and it is repented once again in the engine room where a piece of iron is used to strike the bells. Then the watch is relieved and life goes on and on in this little world all by itself out on the deep blue sea.